

Spectrums' Frequencies

Hector E. Garcia

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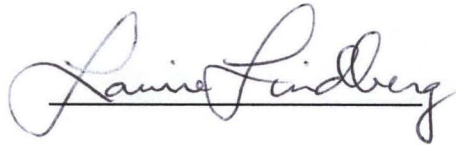
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Hector E. Garcia

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Laurie Lindberg

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Laurie Lindberg", written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

Fantasy and science-fiction are widely regarded to be genre fiction and separate from the literature studied within the academic and scholarly fields. These classifications of writing also are often victim to tropes and archetypes that, while not inherently detrimental to any work, in many works tend to be utilized by similar, limited methods. However, there are many short story and full novel works of both fantasy and science-fiction that would fit well in a scholarly-reviewed environment, works which analyze themes of identity, gender roles, race, class conflict and current issues in both U.S. and international societies. This creative work, titled *Spectrums' Frequencies*, consists of glimpses into a larger story. It would be arrogant to present this story as an answer to the problem of fantasy and science-fiction lacking in innovation or scholarly attention; however, it is my best response to both issues, while also striving to provide a good story that will entertain readers as well as give them cause to think about the world from a variety of perspectives. This story also attempts to bring to light themes I have not seen represented often in any media: size acceptance, alternative sexualities, and homosexuality as being part of a whole rather than the basis for a token character.

Acknowledgements

-Extensive gratitude is directed towards Dr. Laurie Lindberg for advising me through this project. She not only fulfilled and exceeded the role of faculty advisor, she provided attentive ears and a curious, open mind to what was once hardly more than my incoherent ramblings on some fantasy story I wanted to write. Her Honors Colloquium class on Fairy Tales has enriched my knowledge and appreciation of fairy tales and their role in cultural histories, as well as the importance they held and can still carry today.

-I would also like to thank Diana Wynne Jones, whom I have never met or spoken to but who, through her excellent and varied fantasy novels, shows an understanding of humans as children, teenagers and adults alike in a way that is frank yet deep and multifaceted. She also is one of the earliest and most prolific authors I have encountered who has fearlessly defied tropes and traditional fantasy conventions, choosing instead to tell her story and not worrying about whether it happens to fit certain archetypes on the way.

-L. Frank Baum, thank you for writing all fourteen Oz books. From what I've learned it was tough for you at times, but your innovation and even brilliance showed through often enough that there is simply nothing like the Marvelous Land and people of Oz.

-My sister Ileana has helped criticize and improve both my artwork and writing since I was young, and is never afraid to take me down a notch or five when I need it. Ile, it was hard to take what you said sometimes, but those bitter pills have helped me look at my own work through different lens; that is among the lessons I most highly value.

-My mother, Darlene, has never lost faith in me. For that, I owe her everything.

-My family has always been and I know will always be there for me.

-To friends and loves now and past – you helped build me up and burn me down so many times I've learned how to earthquake-proof my mind and spirit. The pains you caused and pleasures you incited have added to the groundwork of my psyche, and I know you and those I will meet from now on will provide plenty more bricks and mortar. I can only hope they arrive by wheelbarrow and not as missiles.

Introduction

Spectrums' Frequencies is a story about several stories; it involves the lives, ambitions, and hopes of several characters, and often their interactions with each other are what propel the events forward. The story has long gone without a title, and the title may change in future. For the most part, I've thought of this story in terms of the characters, and the larger world and story they inhabit did not begin to form until after most of the characters had already been developed as individuals.

My purpose for writing and pursuing this story is multi-layered. Since I was young, I enjoyed drawing; however, everything I drew had to have a story behind it. Through high school and again in college, I made up stories and developed my drawing skills in order to better express the characters in those stories. I tried to make the people I invented come to life both on the computer screen and on sketchbooks (or, more often than not, alongside class notes). Arriving at college, I decided to start fresh, and a cast of characters and different storylines developed, separate from any I had worked with in high school or earlier.

One of the pivotal moments in my years at college and, so far, in my life was when I realized I had no interest in Wildlife Biology, and switched my major to Creative Writing. As I took creative writing classes, I began to see what stories could really do. As I read literature before and during my new English focus, I started to appreciate the power of words, and understood why my teachers held so much reverence for literature as I grew older. For a while I wondered whether my writing and my stories had any purpose or meaning. As I continued my studies and read more books, watched more movies and

learned more about the world and people (even taking into consideration some of the limitations in scope inevitable in a small town), I started to find what I cared about. I began to see new reasons for me to write as well as better understand the value of my original intent for my stories.

The chapters so far in *Spectrums' Frequencies* are the beginning of my response to what I perceive as what fantasy and science fiction have ignored or avoided so far. With the story I address and discuss themes of sexuality, gender, gender roles, societal and human constructs, identity, size/shape and appearance as well as one's own acceptance and appreciation of such, trying to understand how and why people differ so much from each other. I mention fantasy and science-fiction together because they often intersect. Magical elements can appear from past settings such as the Middle Ages or on alien planets explored by astronauts in the future, and "alternative histories" often appear in fantasy with many "what if scenarios" that include speculations on how history would have changed if certain weapons, tools or materials had been found at different times, by different people, than those that shaped the world as we know it. Many books in both genres have made interesting innovations with these and other concepts in mind. Part of the writing process involved in *Spectrums' Frequencies* includes explorations of how the world could be different if certain events had occurred differently, as well as various incorporations of familiar archetypes and fairy tales.

Spectrums' Frequencies is presented here as a collection of chapters-in-progress. The main reason for this format was to make portions of the story small enough to detail and rework while showing that there is a larger story at work, and that one character's actions

in one scene or chapter may have greater effects later in the story. Also, this format allowed for me to get the scenarios and personalities that are the most congealed and vivid in my head into one work within a limited time frame. There are several writings not included in this collection because they were essentially studies and textual sketches of characters and situations to see how well one or another would work in the story.

The title of the creative work was recently chosen, but the process of selecting it has been ongoing for years. It has been difficult to think of a title that encompasses all of what the characters represent and how their actions affect each other and the plot, while not being so broad or general as to sound contrived. “Spectrum” is heavily inspired by the name of the GLBTSQ group at Ball State University. The word “spectrum” makes reference to the varying sexualities and identities of characters in the story, and it also has more literal symbolism: the character Lumiere not only has a name that is French for “light,” but also most of his magic revolves around the use and manipulation of self-generated light; color plays an important role when Shay Pipt enters the astral plane; color symbolism is involved in patterns and spells of the prison-monolith that contains the Essence (later known as the spirit of shadows, Daroque); overall, there are “spectrums” of experiences and knowledge that play to each character’s strengths and weaknesses.

The word “frequencies” is used for two of its meanings: the frequency of energy wavelengths, and multiple occurrences of an event or situation. Energy wavelengths play back to color, but the word “wavelengths” can also refer to how people think – for example, one could say I and my sister are on the same “wavelength” on many topics concerning our generation, but I have trouble reaching the same “wavelength” as my grandfather, who is

from a different generation and has very different experiences. This more modern definition of “wavelength” is significant to the story because many characters connect in important ways to others, while each character may also have habits, ideologies, beliefs or experiences that other characters have trouble relating to, if they can at all. For example, Princess Tress and Jasper (the Royal Wizard of Riverwright) are on a first-name basis, and he is quick to tell her the information she wants to know as opposed to the stalling evident of the summoner and sorcerer. However, it could also be argued that Lumiere and Alabastius the sorcerer do not see eye-to-eye on how magic should be used.

The “multiple occurrences of an event or situation” definition of “frequencies” relates to the story in that there are different frequencies of lifestyles in the spectrum of characters and groups in the story. There will be many heterosexual “normal” relationships and experiences applied to situations, but the use of “frequencies” in the plural sense is also meant to remind readers that other “alternative” lifestyles and worldviews occur with considerable frequency as well; in the world of this story, that fact remains.

“Spectrums’ frequencies” has the word “spectrum” in the possessive form. So, the frequencies – of mental/emotional/spiritual connect or disconnect, and of occurrences of alternative perspectives and experiences – in this case relate directly to the spectrum of individuals in the world. It is a difficult correlation to explain; the title was settled upon because it has several layers of meaning yet allows for further interpretation and application, should more apply in the future.

Some characters’ physical appearances are given particular focus in the chapters presented here. For some, intended symbols and metaphors exist in different aspects of

each character's appearance. Shay Pipt is repeatedly mentioned to be "curvy," wide-hipped and to have an exaggerated feminine shape because it is a constant source of anxiety for him. Though he identifies as male and indeed is biologically male, he feels comfortable in some roles both masculine and feminine and secretly enjoys his shape despite his paternal figure's (Dr. Marvis Pipt's) insistence on adhering to traditional ideals of masculinity. Clarence, the golem-android who flirts with Shay, is aware of the disappointment he caused in his creator, since his body was shaped to be the Classical model of manhood, but once his spirit was infused into the body it was first adjusted (by the spirit) with the more sexually-ambiguous qualities of a cat, and Clarence himself freely flirts with individuals of varying sexes and identified genders. J'ody's fine, meticulous dress is noted because, though the coyote prizes others (like Shay) as sexual objects, rather than people with personalities, he perceives an importance in presentation and maintaining at least a modicum of control over one's image. The dragon blacksmith and the mutt-wizard Licori whom Lumiere encounter are both emphasized in terms of how thick, large, and bulky they are; Lumiere is a young canine anthro contending with an awakening sexual identity, and these two larger males are sources of worship and desire for Lumiere.

A lot was learned in the writing process of this creative work. As both a writer and a Creative Writing major, I learned the value of time management. However, I also learned that sometimes when I put pressure on myself, even the pressure of getting an assignment in on time, I tend to produce more than when I have plenty of free time. Writing is both a necessary release of pent-up expression and a process akin to pulling teeth. A lot of my thesis was completed earlier in the last two semesters when I forced myself to sit in front of the computer and start writing. I was worried this would not accumulate into a body of

work in time, but it turned out that focusing all of my attention on a computer screen dominated by a Word document was more productive than I had realized. It should be noted that I got almost all of the work done in computer labs; I have my own laptop, but the problem with a personal computer is that the internet, bookmarks to favorite websites, videogames, and other customizations are easier to access and be distracted by. When in a computer lab, I have a greater sense of purpose because busy students are using the computers. If I waste time in a computer lab, I'm taking up space in a computer that another student could be using to get an essay or report done. Music could help, but more often than not my writing process evolved to be most effective on a public computer in as quiet a room as possible.

On several occasions I got into a slump, either by emotional depression or from feeling burned out after a week or two of several academic essays. I found that what helped best to get my spirits up and creativity ignited again was to watch a film where story and characters were beautifully explored. Most of the animated films by Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki never cease to amaze me in how seamless the characters and plot intertwine to create a story in which the viewer becomes intensely invested in what happens next. A good book could have a similar effect; Terry Pratchett's books taking place in his "Discworld" storyline showed me the value of portraying the perspectives of different, fully fledged characters while not taking one's own work too seriously.

What surprised me as I took creative writing classes was that my Nonfiction class, and the nonfiction literature we read, proved invaluable in developing my approach to writing. Nonfiction shows that what happens in real life are stories often just as fascinating

or relatable as the most famous fairy tales or best written fiction. While my creative work is a work of fiction, my Nonfiction class provided a great foundation for developing a character. Even in Nonfiction, people who play roles in the story must be developed as characters in order for readers to become involved in the story. A person in the real world with no magical powers or futuristic inventions could be far more compelling than many fantastical characters, primarily because the real person's ambitions, personality, and drive were developed clearly in sufficient detail.

The stories of *Spectrums' Frequencies* are from my experiences and from what I've seen in the world. Together I hope they express a world seen as not much unlike our own; apart, I hope they detail that the prism of reality refracts life into much, much more than six or seven colors. Not even ultraviolet or infrared, gamma or micro or radio waves can account for the depths of humanity, especially because nothing and no one will ever create a complete spectrograph of the depths of any one human self. Remaining oblivious to what truths exist may be for the best. Nevertheless, the attempt to understand life and reality, even the attempts to map any aspect of them, are quests that should never be abandoned. Considering the curiosity displayed by human civilizations since before the written word, it is fortunate that dives into the nature of humanity will never cease.

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When Crooked Wielded the Crook

Shay Pipt was a genetically engineered masterpiece. At least, his creator and father Dr. Marvis Pipt thought so – but then, Dr. Pipt had devoted far more time and research and, most importantly, care in his second “son” Shay, more than Clarence, his first creation.

The doctor was well known as the Crooked Crook-Wielder by the more cynical villagers and officially as the resident Allison of the Munch-Gillian-Quadrol tricounty area. Despite his role’s prominence in the community, he always kept secret from everyone the exact means of the most vital component of Shay’s physiology and purpose.

Summoning was a strictly policed and difficult to master career of magic. Even those certified by an Academy knew better than to guarantee control of even lower-level summons. Also, among those of the One Faith summoning was considered an illicit and immoral venture into the world of demons and devils.

The doctor knew better, of course. He never undertook a task without first reading every known book on the topic, and part of his Crooked title came from his determination to gain valuable research by any means possible. Thus did Dr. Pipt stumble, within the unbound, fragile leaves of text older than his nation’s independence, information considered so questionable by the ancient author that it was written as hardly a theory. But there it was, and as it appeared in Dr. Pipt’s translation among his precious notes.

“The stars themselves are said to be among those spirits wandering in the supernatural plane we know as ‘the Wunderlands’. A more precise

description would be that the spirits of these stars reside in the Wunderlands, and their bodies are the pinpoints of light and warmth we perceive from Earth's solid surface."

Marvis Pipt had never encountered such a thought, nor had one occurred to him before he turned to that fateful leaf. True to his nature, he explored this theory, and realized that the details of many forbidden high-level summons matched the folklore and astrology of certain well-known stars. Sol himself could be among them!

Dr. Pipt had already spent countless hours exploring how he could improve upon his prototype organic-simulation, Clarence. The android was largely built of various silicones, from the special rubber-like substance Dr. Pipt had helped develop in his professorial days to the quartz-carbon fusion he had invented later. A layer of pure white alabaster was encased within the transparent outer casing of the majority of his parts, allowing for the beautiful stone to shimmer through while protected by the clear but sturdy casings. Clarence was powerful in body and in mind, his brain circuitry composed primarily of nerve-conductive rose quartz. However, Dr. Pipt admitted he should have heeded his assistant Margolotte's warning.

Dr. Pipt had managed to bottle the essence of a djinni to install into the android's structure. However, even with Dr. Pipt's tinkering and teasing to get the spirit to fit the mind, the installed essence turned out to have transferred unpredictable qualities. These included many of the traits of a cat, to the extent that the golem-droid's body had been morphed by the essence poured into it to become

akin to an anthropomorphic cat, though with a clearly synthesized body. One good result out of the unusual turn of events was that Clarence acquired the cleverness and adaptability of both a feline and human. Even so, Clarence did not fully fit the masculine ideal Dr. Pipt had intended when sculpting his body with classical statues as his guide.

This time, though, Dr. Pipt was determined not to make the same mistake. He would obtain a pure spirit, one who had never experienced life or earthly distractions – he strived to separate his science from his religion, but he could not escape his convictions against the indulgent expression of physical pleasures, or the desires of it. So his next creation would have the spirit of a young star, innocent and pure beyond any virgin of tales or legends. Or so he hoped.

Notes: Here Dr. Pipt is introduced. This chapter would appear in the beginning, likely before the first chapters on Lumiere the Border Collie since the events here take place well before Shay Pipt's participation in the larger story. However, this chapter would not be the first; some introduction to and background on the book's world would appear first.

Dr. Marvis Pipt was once a respected professor at the prestigious York University, but retired amid controversy and secluded himself in a small private estate in a rural area of the Melbourne Continent. Here he maintains a role as an experienced Allison – a wizard specializing in traveling to the astral plane, dealing with dreams, and handling threats from non-corporeal planes of existence – as well as furthering the research that spurred debate in his years at the University.

This research involves experiments in creating life, Marvis Pipt being based on both Dr. Pipt (the Crooked Magician) from L. Frank Baum's *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* as well as Dr. Frankenstein from the famous Mary Shelley novel. He approaches the puzzle of life with a focus on artificial intelligence and fully independent entities

– golems and even basic androids already exist in his world, but they merely follow a limited set of commands. Dr. Marvis Pipt hopes to create more than a machine or a tool, though he has yet to think very far of the ramifications or consequences of achieving his goals.

A Slip of the Jeweler's Chisel

Shay drummed his fingers on the window ledge, his other hand a chin-rest for his snout. He sighed with a gentle puff, whisking in the air with a finger a charm to dance a few leaves in intricate twirls before letting them drift to the ground.

"Boringness and drear..." he muttered. Restless anxiety filled him at the sheer calmness of the house. The letter would arrive today! Was he the only one wracking his brains?

"At least with mine, you can see 'em work," chuckled a glimmering figure who sashayed into the room. "You clam up and don't tell anyone *anything*."

The sheep at the window jumped a bit, and did his best to glare at the "Glass" Cat, who crossed his naked, clear arms on the wooden windowsill as if he had every right to perch there. The intensity of Shay's glare was dampened somewhat by the pink blush that showed through his cheek-fleece. After all, the anthropomorphic Cat *was* naked, and his male body was sculpted perfectly, muscled and toned but not so bulky as to be unnatural. Despite his unnerving, almost glowing paleness due to the layer of carved alabaster underneath his transparent outer casing, the cat was well aware of how attractive certain people found him. Particularly Shay.

"Clarence... you don't dare streak about the house when Father is around. Why do you insist on entering my bedroom without a blasted thing on?" Shay's cheeks flushed deeper as he half-stood, then quickly leaned into the windowsill again upon realization that such action would reveal the cat's also-perfectly sculpted lower regions. He could only deal with one moment of embarrassment at a time today.

"Well, why do you think? I'm beautiful, and you like it. I refuse to give up until you give in, and I have you *just* where I want you."

"Oh?" Shay raised an eyebrow, his short fleecy bobtail twitching irritably.

"And where would that be, then?"

Clarence only smirked with a low, tinkling purr as his emerald eyes pointed at the bed.

Shay snorted, which to his dismay and annoyance ended in a cute little "ba-aa." "Oh, clever, clever. And good luck. I told you, I'm... well...."

"*Saving yourself?*" The cat's snickers sounded like smug little bells. "Please. To be honest, I don't think you really know why. Seriously now, why not?"

The sheep squirmed, his long blonde tresses bobbing gently. "'Cause... drear and blast it, because you're like a brother to me, Clarence!" It was unusual for Shay to shout, as it only emphasized his soft, light voice, but it still had an effect on the glass cat. Clarence's eyes widened for a second in confusion, then narrowed, the Cat caught off-guard.

"...Really now?" The silicon-based feline was cautious now. "You never... expressed *that* before."

Shay's anger pushed past his embarrassment, and a hot tear streaked through his downy face-fur as he looked up at the taller Cat. "I did so! Why do you think I always get even more nervous than usual around you? You're so confoundedly *perfect*, built like a dream, but I grew up with you! We might as well be biological brothers, and that makes your flirting all sorts of awkward. You only started this since I last came home. Why this sudden lust for *me*, of all people?"

Clarence sighed, a sound as rare as Shay's shout. The glamorous Cat looked down the sheep's form slowly. Shay wore a simple shirt and trousers around the Pipt household, but it did nothing to hide the sheep's curves, his hips flaring out in such an odd way for a male, his rear curved against the trouser seat, his body fluffed and full but with a considerable tone from his duties. Shay wriggled a bit, his ears flicking nervously at the long, admiring look, before Clarence's emerald eyes locked on Shay's gray ones.

"I would have thought my interest was obvious. I know you better than anyone, Shay. *Anyone*. And you know me better than them, too. It's... well, hard for anyone to like what's in this," he tapped his left pectoral, and panels within slid aside to reveal his chiseled ruby heart. "It's hard and cold, yeah, I know. But it *is* a heart, and you're the only one so far who sees that. Look, it's hard to explain. But you're the only one... well... you're the only one in all the rest of this blasted backwater county who... deserves me."

Shay blinked, and ran his fingers through his long, white-gold hair in a slow motion. Having seen the postman coming down the road, he stood, and walked quietly across the room to the door.

"Shay?" Clarence mewled, a worried look on his carefully molded but pliable features.

Shay saw through that look, and paused with his hand on the doorframe. "No. No one deserves. They just... care, or love in some way, or don't." He raised his gaze to meet that of the taller cat. "That's all there is to it, and I'm sorry you don't see it."

With that, Shay's fingers let go of the doorframe, and his hooves clopped on the stone floor towards the front door.

Clarence stood in shock, eyes wide, and then heard something. It sounded like a small, almost inaudible *clink*, but not of a bell ringing. He looked down, and traced a finger over his chest, where he saw that a chip had cracked in his glittering heart. The Cat's emerald gaze lingered where Shay had just been; he walked to the sheep's bed, and after curling up on it sniffed gently at the sheets.

Notes: This was a proposed first chapter for a story focusing on Shay Pipt the sheep, and may still help in introducing both him and his role in the story.

Shay Pipt and Clarence were both creations of Dr. Marvis Pipt, and all live at Dr. Pipt's small, private estate just outside of a small town in Munch County, of Aus Province. Aus is a province on the Melbourne Continent (similar to our world's Australia).

Clarence's design has changed a few times, but his basic concept is that he is an android-golem hybrid, a fusion of magic and technology in the shape of an anthropomorphic cat. Golems are statues of clay given movement and purpose by magic and a single scroll in their heads with a simple set of instructions for a golem to carry out. Clarence is a more advanced version of a golem; Dr. Pipt used some of the magic involved in golem-making but designed a fully functional brain instead of a simple scroll or single set of instructions.

The majority of Clarence's components consist of a sturdy, transparent outer casing with a layer of fine, carved alabaster underneath concealing most of his working parts. Notable exceptions include his rose-quartz brain circuitry, his ruby-based heart, and expertly hewn emerald eyes.

Clarence was a prototype creation of Dr. Pipt in his quest to create free-thinking entities with lives of their own. Shay was his second work, with a focus on

genetic engineering; however, the circumstances surrounding Shay's creation were mysterious and dangerous, and Dr. Pipt keeps quiet whenever the topic comes up.

Clarence and Dr. Pipt are heavily inspired by characters from L. Frank Baum's Oz series, in the case of these two from *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*. In this book, there is a glass cat made by the Crooked Magician (whose name was also Dr. Pipt) in order to test his miraculous Powder of Life.

Why Dogs Howl at the Moon

Lumiere's bike scrunched through the gravel, small rocks spattering as he hurried home, a grin on his muzzle. His riding sandals kept a good grip on the pedals, his tail carefully bent to avoid a painful encounter with the gears or wheel spokes. He nearly giggled with delight as his tongue lolled, every canine's love of rushing wind uplifting his spirits still higher than the morning sun had already.

He heaved up, and his bike skipped over the curb and onto the cobblestones that marked the beginning of Feldsparse. Most of this village section of the city had yet to wake for breakfast, and he whizzed by the plaster, brick, and wood houses, briefly cha-chinging the bike bell as he turned corners. The muddy gray cobblestones merged in his lower vision and became a spring river swollen with silt, a side stream of the great River Laru that only he could skip across without even a ripple.

He began to slow as he neared the smithy, and hopped off his bike nimbly two houses down. Clangs and gongs could be heard even this early, and the telltale, billowing black smoke was obvious from blocks away.

Not many towns had a smithy – they were more common in the bigger cities, and there were even two established ones in the downtown district. No one had complained when the blacksmith had moved in, however. A smithy always brought business, and this metalworker's pieces rivaled the more commercialized city smithies so that his value to this side of town superseded the smith's unusual heritage.

It was precisely this unique aspect of the metalworker that led Lumiere to walk his bike quietly down a short alley to a house before the smithy, the walls surrounding him each painted brilliantly, one smoke-stained bright blue, the other peachy orange. Behind the blue house neighboring the smithy was a sparse yard, and here the young dog stepped through with even greater care, until he was behind the fence of the smith's own backyard.

Lumiere rested his bike against the red brick wall of the house behind the blacksmith's yard, and took a deep breath. He was shivering – from the chilly Riverwright morning air or anxiety, he was unsure – but he still took his position crouching before two crooked slats of the wooden fence before him. *Just a couple minutes*, he reminded himself. *Just enough to see... oh my.*

The smith lumbered into view, wiping sweat and grime from his scaly forehead. He then took the towel-sized cloth and wiped at his thick chest. Each pectoral rippled with strength even underneath a layer of fat, the same fat that bulged around his waist, huge and wide and round, bigger, to Lumiere's wide eyes, than an overweight draft horse's torso. The dragon's arms were thicker than the young dog's waist, and sweat glistened on the scales there too – his limbs seemed hardly affected by the adipose that so wonderfully graced his thick middle. Lumiere had only been able to guess at the looming figure's height, but he guessed that even without the curved, fearsome horns he easily surpassed two meters in height, perhaps two and a half.

Riverwright society, as a rule, respected creatures of old. This did not mean that they trusted them, but this dragon had proven civilized, efficient, and skilled

enough to override most wariness. A cow only went missing about once or twice every other month, and this was passable given what was known about dragons. Better for a few cows to get “lost” than for another dragon to embark on a ravenous rampage.

The first time Lumiere had seen the dragon was the day he moved in, just down the street from the dog’s own household. That was almost a year ago, and Lumiere had been entranced by the gigantic, draconic male ever since. He had only mustered the courage to dare even this personal espionage a few months into the dragon’s stay.

Shifting his stance, Lumiere kept watching, squirming in place and stifling a rather happy whimper at the sight before him. The dragon was splashing water from a large fountain over his massive, muscled and round form. This made his scales shine and glitter like a mystical fish of Larulan legends, only with scales of emerald rather than silver, and a form of steel-solid masculinity rather than mystical ethereality.

One of Lumiere’s floppy ears perked and his tail twitched nervously as the dragon seemed to pause. The dog froze as the dragon’s thick bull’s neck seemed to turn just slightly, and what little he could see of the alligator-like muzzle seemed to shift into a small grin. The dog would have bolted right then if what he saw next had not overridden his fear of discovery.

The dragon began to strip off his leather work pants.

Lumiere knew he held back his gasp and even the canine whine that would have followed, but he almost felt the dragon’s attention extend to his crouching

form. The dog leaned forward intently, muzzle pushed and nose squished against the wooden slats.

The pants were only halfway down, however, before his vision was blocked by the image of a flashing stopwatch. He let out a yip and stumbled onto his rump. He had completely forgotten about that alarm spell!

Shaking his head to clear the stopwatch-spell from his vision, he nearly leaped down the nearest alley, pulling the bicycle with him. Panic surged through his form and guided it to hop onto the pedals and ride off, back onto the cobblestones and down the street to his home.

Now that there was some distance and time between his panic and the current moment, Lumiere stumbled off his bike, nearly tripping and bringing both dog and bicycle to the ground. He righted himself, and with an arm leaned against the wall beside the front step, panted heavily and shuddered before he let out a nervous giggle.

He may have only seen it for a second and a half, but the dragon's rear was *incredible*. He felt anxious and proud and guilty all at once, and he managed to gulp down his confused mirth and barely avoid hiccups as a result. Still shaking lightly, he pulled his bicycle around the workshop joined to the house to secure it in the back shed.

A cacophony of bells, whistles, cuckoos and toots, underscored by loud swearing, could be heard blaring from the workshop.

Notes: Lumiere is an anthropomorphic (anthro) border collie, and a series of events lead up to his arrival at the cathedral. He has considerable magical prowess but only an apprentice's knowledge of how to use it. Lumiere was raised by an upper-middle-class human family, and was provided several tutors for academics – magic, however, he has kept secret from everyone and so far has mostly taught himself.

Notes: This chapter would come after an epilogue and perhaps one other chapter concerning Lumiere. He has just returned from a morning bike ride, and from the adrenaline gained the confidence to carry out his plan. He's matured later than most human teenagers – here he's around 16 – and so puberty's little effects have started to trigger. Lumiere, though, has always admired males even as a small pup, despite being raised by two women (As they call themselves, "distant cousins") and being close as a brother to their son. As with any voyeuristic feat of a teenage male, Lumiere has a mixed reaction to his peeping, but more than anything he's glad he tried.

As for a timeline, this chapter is early on in Lumiere's story, before he finds and enters the Cathedral but well after he has started to tutor himself in magic. He's an unregistered magic user, but has managed to remain low-key enough so far to avoid the notice of the law. He hides it because he has no idea how his family would take it, faced as they were with a magical catastrophe before he was born. That, and he secretly fears he will be shipped out to a magic-teaching Academy instantly and far from the family he knows, loves and is fiercely loyal to despite long held secrets among the D'Canari household.

Sunlight Spills into a Dark Cathedral

Footfalls sounded quietly on the smooth stone floor, muffled by fur and pawpads. Only the soft clacking of gentle claws could be heard. The small, upright figure stepped like a cautious mouse through a sleepy kennel of cats, not daring to even breathe too hard for fear of waking what could not be seen in the gloomy corners of the building.

Lumiere shivered, but stilled the chattering of his teeth before it began. Yes, the place was chilled, like a cave that was on the threshold between winter and spring. But the true chills came from the sheer sadness of the place. The high, high walls of the cathedral seemed to sigh and whisper through the cracks in their ornate but faded stained glass windows, windows that Lumiere could almost detect a story within were it not for their much shattered deterioration. What tales he could make out from the fragments that remained were sadder still; a great battle had been fought, though only the human half of the two armies remained intact. The last few windows seemed to describe a series of smaller but more intense battles, becoming fiercer and more desperate as they led back to the entrance of the cathedral, flashes of the other army charging through their pieces of glass, an army of green and yellow, of leaves and sunlight and dark shapes in the shadows, all united against the human masses. The silicon story raged and escalated, culminating in the great glass window that loomed above the already fearsomely large double doors that marked the cathedral entrance. Every color in every other window was muted, and upon closer inspection not so much faded as tired, weary of retaining their hues in the gray, gray semi-light that surrounded the steady stone structure.

However, in this great entrance window, every color was still vibrant and livid, and seven humans were positioned as rays with their swordpoints thrust towards the center. In this center was a dark figure, its features difficult to distinguish as shades of deep purple and black had been chosen to portray it instead of the usual, lighter colors of stained glass. Lumiere could make out a large form with antlers atop it, and it reared in what the glassmakers surely meant as an aggressive pose – but which Lumiere saw as a wounded animal, cornered and making its last stand as the option to flee had been lost. The colors almost glowed in their intensity, as if it was a memory burned in the mind that would never be forgotten or changed no matter the time that passed – or the desire to forget it entirely.

Lumiere's floppy ears perked, and his muzzle darted from side to side before he looked around in a slow, careful circle. Certain thoughts, of a cornered animal and the desire to forget that bright, colorful window-memory, had not been his. Someone or something was nearby, and if it could broadcast thoughts into his own mind then it could be dangerous, on a level the small dog did not feel prepared for.

With a deep but quiet breath to reassure himself, despite his tail tucking down nervously, he outstretched a cotton-sleeved arm and flicked his fingers in three simple motions, murmuring soft words that nevertheless swept the room like a breeze to dust. Five drops of pinkish-gold, miasmic light streamed from his fingers, like amorphous orbs of dawn luminance, and began to collect in his palm until a brightly glowing ball of rose-gold light flared in his hand. He gasped as the dawn light flooded the entire cathedral like a merry flash of lightning. Quickly, Lumiere

squished it gently between both palms, rotating it in his pawpads until, like a lightbulb dimmed, its light grew softer and more subdued, just enough to illuminate a small halo around him and allow him sight in the monotone gloom.

The cathedral was small in volume despite its grand height, and the border collie had only walked forty paces before he almost stumbled into a great structure within this strange, eerie building. He whimpered and whined nervously, as here the sadness was dammed up, brimming over with the magic that was molded into the walls, spilling through the very stone. It felt like someone was yanking every one of his heartstrings: like there was no hope, ever, of being free again, of seeing the world whole again, of seeing *him* again...

Lumiere grabbed the sphere of rose-tinted light, stifling a sob from the infectious depression, and shoved it against his chest and his heart. Shuddering at the golden warmth and letting out a long, relieved sigh, he felt renewed and himself again. Those thoughts, this immense sadness, were again not his own, and he felt more confident in the distinction as he pulled the glowing ball out from where it had been lodged harmlessly in his chest.

Nevertheless, his caution doubled, and he took ginger paces towards the strange, cubical structure that loomed before him. Upon waving the light to either side and then beginning to walk around it, he saw that it was not a cube but in fact a pentagonal prism, the flat edge facing the entrance and the direction from which he had approached it. He continued around the large stone prism, noting that it was twice as tall as he and almost as large as the living room in his home. It took him several minutes to get around it, the time lengthened as he walked slowly with wide

eyes, admiring the intricate and immensely powerful spells that were built into the walls and entwined with further spells of magical endurance. Whoever had built this had intended it to last a long time, perhaps forever. He noticed that the structure was a single piece, as if hewn and carved out of a mountain; the stone was a deep earthy color that only vaguely matched the grayness of the cathedral walls.

Finding himself back at the flat wall he had first encountered, he studied the single, tall but squarish door, carved with intricate symbols and shapes. Inspecting closer, he saw that it was the wedge-shaped alphabet of the Valley people; he knew from his history lessons that they had been gone for thousands of years. But then, why the medieval gothic cathedral? Then again, this slab of stone and the larger structure housing it didn't seem to match anyway.

Lumiere's tongue poked out a bit from his muzzle in a puzzled expression as he attempted to decipher the language. His history tutor had been particularly rigorous in his syllabus; even so, no one really knew how to fluently read the language of ancient peoples. The pup kept staring, though, squinting a bit before he blinked, mouth open in awe as the wedge shaped symbols, while not exactly moving, seemed to morph and shift closer to a modern alphabet. He scrambled to read it before whatever had just happened wore off, and he could just barely make out a message in the stone.

It was simple, and it read thus:

Here lies sealed the spirit of the shadows and our fears. His defeat is the prosperity of Humanity; his freedom is the End of Cities.

The border collie frowned, more dumbfounded than before. What on Earth did it mean? "The spirit of shadows...." The pup's mind wandered back to the dark figure in the center entrance glass. He now realized that the seven sword-wielding humans must have been the ones who sealed him. But why? *"His defeat is the prosperity of Humanity; his freedom is the End of Cities."*

Before Lumiere could reflect further on this strange inscription, he doubled over and nearly fell to his knees. The anguish was aflame with hope now, and the two emotions were so desperate that, without thinking, Lumiere reached out his handpaw to grab the ring that served as the door's handle.

Flying back several feet, the pup yelped and yowled in pain, clutching his burned handpaw. He whimpered, and instinctively licked at the reddened, tender flesh of his pawpads, before gently taking his orbiting sphere of light and pressing it to the wound. He winced, as the burn intensified for a moment, then shuddered and sighed as gentle warmth replaced it. The sensation of a soothing spring breeze followed soon after, and Lumiere shakily stood on his bare feetpaws, brushing nonexistent dust off his gray pants.

His handpaw was only slightly tender now, the skin of his pawpads a little pinched in the final stages of recovery from a serious burn. This wasn't on the collie's mind, however. With determined steps, he marched to the door, and looked it up and down as if in silent reprimand to a younger pup.

The desperation washed over him like an icy waterfall cracking free from frozen and desolate mountains. He even heard a voice, distinct from the thoughts that had entangled in his own earlier:

L...Luz? H...hel...p me... Luz...

His doubts about what was within vanished. Lumiere could not ignore someone – or even something – so helpless, alone, and desperately hopeful. Whoever it was had hope for the first time in millennia, beyond the civilization that imprisoned it.

Lumiere grabbed the rose-yellow ball, and hurled it at the door. It stuck halfway in, and then slowly spread into the masonry. As it did, streams of light filled a pattern as if melting forth from the sphere of light, which had landed directly in the center of a symbol of the sun, now glittering canary yellow, followed by sky-blue clouds around it, in turn within a square of red-and-gold castle walls. Further patterns, both organic and geometric, traversed and spidered along the door, until finally it sparkled with every color of the spectrum and groaned loudly.

The pup waited, expectant and anxious, but the door did not open. He yerfed in confusion, and taking out a slim metal wand from his pocket, he poked with the briefest contact at the door. A small shock traveled through the metal to his arm, but nowhere near the searing pain of earlier. Still nothing happened.

He felt excitement and confusion coming from whatever was inside, unvoiced but mentally clear. Lumiere's face brightened as he remembered a tip from his main magical textbook, *The Book of Magic Spelled and Sworn*. His high, clear, but soft voice rang out as he tried it:

"My name is Lumiere d'Canari, and I command you to open!"

The border collie pup jumped back with his wand at the ready. The door had groaned again, and kept groaning with additional gratings and shrieks that made

him cover his ears with a wince. This continued for a full minute before he opened his eyes from cringing at the horrible screeching sounds. The door was fully open, and total darkness lay inside.

He hesitated for a few moments, and conjured another ball of rose-gold light, careful to turn the intensity up slowly as opposed to another blinding flash. He stood before the open entrance, fear bubbling up inside him now. His light did not pierce the shadows inside; the pinkish-yellow glow stopped right at what seemed like nothing and yet also a solid wall of shadow. Lumiere swallowed, and couldn't completely stifle a nervous whine.

As if sensing his fear, the shadow retreated, sucking itself further inside the room. Desperation clogged the air. Lumiere took a deep breath; he had started this, and he knew now without being sure why that he must finish whatever he had started. If for no other reason, the border collie felt it would be cruel to leave whatever was ahead behind, now that he was this far.

Footpaws started moving, and Lumiere forced them to keep up a slow but steady pace as he entered the dark room within the dark cathedral.

Notes: Lumiere's powers are various, but here is shown his ability to generate a unique substance best described as a kind of corporeal light. This substance has several properties depending on what Lumiere wants it to do, and from what Lumiere has learned so far those properties involve differing degrees of reactions to different organic, inanimate and magical substances/sources.

In a previous chapter, how Lumiere found the Cathedral and his entrance into it would be explained; in the next, what he finds inside the stone room is revealed, and leads to many of the later events and conflicts and causes several characters to cross roads.

Hansel's Maiden Flight

The suit was light, its true weight coming from its purpose. It was strong, but only so much as its bearer and creator. The pale green, blue and yellow lights pulsed to life and became steady, steadier than the wearer's nerves.

This was the suit's first field test, and despite Sebastian's many lab tests and personal strength tests, despite months of training his body and a lifetime honing his mental acuity, his stomach fluttered and his heart leaped in nervous confusion. He had sworn never to use his discoveries or creations for combat or to harm, but he was left with no choice – somewhere, someone had even more of his knowledge in practically blueprint form, and he knew his technology well enough to realize only he could stop it.

Not that any of this showed on his stern face. So accustomed to keeping up a façade of stability and immovable emotion, even now in his moments of inner conflict his expression was steady; his tall, lean, and oddly curved body directed itself with a purpose, until his paw hesitated in mid-reach. Before it rested the source of the suit's power, the three-sectioned pod he would wear on his back like a small backpack. However, this was an inaccurate description; while the pod contained necessary fuel, it was more of a converter of powers only he held, the only reason this suit would work far different from similar engines he had constructed.

Dubbed the Hansel Mark II, it was a vastly modified version of the sugar-based converter engines that had made him a household name in the city of York, and increasingly in developed nations across three continents. It was an elegance of simplicity, but only his mind had mapped out the workings needed to take simple

sugars and starches and convert them into a source of fuel for any small-scale engine. It was clean energy, which was part of the reason he had developed it; the other reason was that it was extremely difficult to use for anything other than its intended purpose. That included weaponry – except for this model, and the recent developments Hansel II had been built to respond to.

Reminded of his self-determined duty, his paw rose, though not immediately to the Hansel. Instead, he touched two fingers to his forehead, parting his straight-cut bangs as fingerpads touched fur. Two marks appeared beneath his fingers: one a triangular frame which glowed with verdant brilliance, and the other an intensely dark black dot within the triangle, both symbols striking on his vaguely bluish, white fur.

The triangle, the scientific symbol for change. The black dot, the code for the carbon atom, which was in turn the basis of all living forms. Together, they formed meanings of several layers and shades, none of which were lost on Sebastian Quinn. He still remembered when he had struggled to imprint those symbols, replacing the cursed marks he had once been forced to bear.

His eyes flashed an intense violet. The one who had branded Sebastian with his former mark had created him; Sebastian had completed tireless trials to fully create and claim his identity, his self. He would not allow that monster's legacy to continue through Sebastian's work, through the rabbit's own hands. It meant breaking his own pacifist promises to himself; "Pacifism is a luxury now," he whispered, as both reminder and reassurance to himself.

Every last vestige of doubt fell out of him, as a butterfly shrugs off the last shards of a cocoon, and without further hesitation he attached the rest of his armor to the thin but incredibly durable bodysuit he wore beneath. That had been another, tricky invention: to create a lightweight material that resisted concussive force explosion or bullet, and helped conduct his own self-generating radiant energies. He didn't have enough faith in it to trust it head on, but for glancing blows it was more than sufficient, and the primary function of both bodysuit and armor was to channel, control and enhance his latent energies. As long as that function was carried out, his abilities had fewer limits than possibilities.

The chestpiece was half the brain of the suit, and ergonomically shaped around his chest and upper torso. An embellishment of his personal symbol was emblazoned upon the center. Rather than a black dot, the Greek letter for alpha, in black, was framed by the green triangle, to put more emphasis on his battle in the name of Life, rather than omega – Death.

Death he hoped to avert tonight. He tugged on his gloves; small armor plates lined the material and shielded his paws and digits while still allowing flexibility. An oval of strong pseudo-glass on the back of his hand housed delicate machinery and a glowing, secondary power source that would help concentrate energy to that hand at will, and small super-conductive pads covered his fingertips and palms. Snapping on his forearm-guards and slipping into his powered boots, he was ready.

Sebastian Quinn took in a deep breath, a breath of meditation and focus. He stepped onto the elevator that would take him down to York University's already-existing tunnels connecting each building; he could launch into battle from a

different location each time, it was all he could manage until he devised a better base of operations. He held his glove-encased paws before him, and nerves began to creep forth again. He spoke the words that had pulled him through times of impossible doubt before, and regained reassurance.

“Hansel cried. Gretel defied. Only then did the Witch die.”

Notes: Sebastian Quinn is an anthro rabbit, genetically engineered by Dr. Mark Mjords. Whatever purpose he had been conceived for, Dr. Mjords used him as a personal servant, lab assistant/test subject, and “escort.” Through a series of encounters with other lab experiments and test subjects, Sebastian began to develop doubts and struggled to educate himself beyond the doctor’s commands and cerebral programming.

It was a difficult fight against everything he had been taught and knew to be true, but eventually Sebastian broke free of the bonds –physical, biological and emotional – and escaped the hold of the doctor. What transpired next is a long story, but eventually Sebastian made his way into society and not only excelled in biochemistry, physics and mechanical engineering but became a leading expert in those fields, pioneering several revolutionary technologies, the most prominent of which are mentioned in this chapter.

Here, he is preparing for his first foray fighting against a new threat to the city, a violent force that was developed by technologies Sebastian pioneered that he thought only he could develop further.

Sebastian Quinn lives on the Melbourne continent, in the city of York – the equivalent in our world of living in Sydney, Australia. Also, the energy source that he built his powered suit around is his own biological radiation – due to aspects of his creation that he has yet to discover, he is more than a mere test-tube rabbit anthro. Buildups of biological energy increase over time, as if his cells are charging with radiant energy constantly. Sebastian has to discharge this energy on a regular basis

or it seeps out with dangerous force at any given moment. The suit he developed helps him not only store this energy but gives him greater control in wielding it.

Fun Fact: The name Sebastian Quinn is a play on the word “question,” taking the sounds of that word (ku-weh, ssch, tchun, and the “s” sound apart) and rearranging them to form two words. It refers to his continual search for answers about his past, his scientific mind and approach to situations, and his constant doubts and explorations of whether, due to his unusual creation and being, he has a soul or at least the mental processes and empathy to allow him to relate sufficiently with other people.

Tall Towers Sans Bowers

The Princess of Riverwright looked out of her tall tower, gazing down below at a dense forest of deep green, ancient and foreboding trees. However, she was not seeking a shining prince, nor was this tower her prison-bedroom. It was southernmost of the four cardinal observatory towers facing an almost tree-hidden dirt road reserved for discreet state business. Though the knight she sought had worn gleaming bronze and steel armor it was now dented and blackened, and he was limping as he led his horse, who looked even readier to collapse than he.

The knight looked up and saluted wearily as he reached a clearing between woods and castle. The princess saluted back, hurrying down the stairs. Her armor clanked and, reacting to her worry, her magical sword shivered and rattled in its scabbard. She calmed herself and her sword with one mail-gloved hand, and strode confidently past the several portcullises and heavy steel doors the guards opened, arriving at the small clearing before the woods began. The soldier, as weary as he looked, stood straight at attention, and the horse straightened its dragging legs to face her just as stoically.

“Bad news from the Larulan front, Princess Tressa. Terrible, really, but you likely figured that.” The grey haired, time-worn soldier gave a mirthless smile. Though the knight was obviously old, he was yet burly and enduring enough for many to guess his age as a decade or two younger than he actually was.

The Princess nodded, holding her helm in one cradled arm, her bright chestnut hair blowing and tangling in the light breeze. “We have seen evidence of it

even here in the capital, and indeed have received several messengers with news from other nations.”

“So it’s true then? Everywhere?”

She looked down and sighed heavily, with a resigned nod. “Yes. The Leylines are flooded as they have never been, with a magical potential whose source remains elusive. However....”

The knight’s pale blue eyes widened as the Princess steadily met his gaze.

“Don’t tell me the reports I’ve heard are true, then?”

She nodded, her face set and dark. “Yes, the Sworn wizards of every messenger’s nation, as well as our own Royal Wizards, have all located the source to Riverwright. I am aware of the implications, Sir Gerald.”

It was Sir Gerald’s turn to sigh, and rub his temples with his mail-clad fingers.

“Glorious. Now every kingdom and their cousin’s territory are going to be crashing down our doors. Looking for no one knows what.”

The Princess was quiet, and it was not a silence that pertained to their conversation. Sir Gerald was approaching seventy, and he had known the Princess and the Queen before her from birth to these troubled times. As such, his eyes narrowed, and he folded his arms, bracing himself for what had to be even worse news.

“What is it?”

The Princess met his narrow gaze, her own eyes brave; for Sir Gerald, though, her hidden, nameless fear was clear.

“It’s the Dark Cathedral. It’s... well, back. And empty.”

She choked on the last word, and stood as silent as Sir Gerald became. He was more than old enough to know the legends, and even if half of them were nervous recordings of superstitious scribes, there was still plenty to fear.

He walked closer to the Princess, and fell on one knee, the steel on his arm clashing against his armor-clad chest to hold his fist over his heart, the sign of fealty to King and State.

“Whatever happens, Princess Tressa, I will meet it head on. Preferably sword-on, but let it be known I will stand by you, Princess.”

She smiled, the gravity of what faced them now – and what would in the near future – dimming her smile to a twitch at either corner of her mouth.

“Thank you, Sir Gerald. Now, let’s get you and Royal inside before both of you collapse in the dirt.”

They shared another smile, each reassuring the other, and trooped slowly past the doors and each portcullis. The sound of each locking and bolting into place reminded them repeatedly of the need for defense, and the hope that what they had would be enough.

Notes: This follows Lumiere’s adventures in the Cathedral he entered. Lumiere grew up in the small city of Feldsparse in the country of Riverwright (comparable to Great Britain and a little of France rolled together, incompatible as they may seem).

Riverwright has a Parliament, but the Royal Family still holds a lot of sway in political and military decisions. Princess Tressa in particular is far more pro-active than many of her ancestors, taking it upon herself as head of the Army – a role rarely disputed due to her capability and the lack of a Prince. The King mostly acts as her counsel, wise enough to see she is much more effective as a public figure due to her popularity.

Riverwright is also home to one of the largest and most magically powerful remnants of the Old Forest, and part of the government's duty is to contain it. Many creatures and dangerous forces reside in the Forest, and chaos has erupted before when one or another of these residents chose to explore beyond the Forest's reach. The Dark Cathedral is the one Lumiere encountered earlier, and his actions there led to its reemergence on the plane of existence the rest of the world was on. It's an ominous sign, though no one is yet sure exactly why that is so.

Leading the Flock to the Fray

The Cathedral, in spite of its towering dark stones and architectural paradox of elegance and brutish fortitude, was a muddled and almost ridiculous scene as Shay approached it. Riverwright magicians of every profession scurried up to the walls and back with worried reports: alchemists, summoners, mages, seers, even a couple of sorcerers. The only significant magician Shay couldn't sight was the Riverwright Royal Wizard, or at least anyone who looked like him. From what he had heard, a cocky, imperious young man would have stood out among all of the barely subdued panic and hectic mutterings.

His hooves clopped gently on the faded-blue cobblestones that dutifully lined the long, wide walkway leading to the imposing but few stairs before the cathedral doors. He couldn't suppress a shudder – the Dark Cathedral, despite its legend that was likely more ancient than the cobblestones, still gained mention in most of the prominent magical histories and persisted as a thematic trope in countless fairy tales and stories. Some doubted it still existed but there it was, huge, dark gray, and brooding. Still, as Shay looked up and admired the work, it was surprisingly free of ugly gargoyles and abundant with elaborate, beautiful carvings, statues and soaring spires. It was comically tall for its floor space, looking like an oversized spire itself. It couldn't have taken more than fifty, sixty paces from one wall to the opposite.

Then again, it was one of the most notorious structures in history, and especially ominous now that it turned out to be here now, when – according to the report Shay had leafed through on the last train – neither it nor the spacious

clearing it rested in had been there just over a week prior. Dangerous, likely, but certainly powerful.

Two halberds crossed and clanked a scant inch from his snout, and he bleated in shock, then coughed and nodded meekly to the two Riverwright soldiers barring his path.

“Rules’re clear: documentation or you were gone five minutes ago.”

“Er, yes, right. Understandable, sirs! I, um, have it here.” Shay reached into an inside coat pocket gingerly and stretched out the scroll to face the men. “I was summoned here by the Deputy Wizard of York on behalf of her highness, the Princess Tressa.”

A slimmer soldier in shinier armor stopped in the middle of passing by, and hurried over to the three. The two guards responded to the hand signal of the newcomer, and lowered the halberds to their sides. Shay Pipt held back a groan and forced his knees to not buckle as he recognized the Princess herself, albeit now with a lot more metal and a lot more... sharp than her portraits allowed. He nervously eyed the two swords and several daggers carefully aligned with her armor.

“You are the Allison Pipt? No offense, Allison, but I imagined you a lot less fluff... that is, my reports of Aus were that your provincial Allison-Wizard was human. Has Munch County been more progressive than they say?” She winked at the last sentence, which was just enough to halt the onset of Shay’s hyperventilation.

He shifted on his hooves, which despite his large coat and breeches made his wide hips sway obviously. He gritted his teeth and steeled himself; he had a (very)

feminine figure, but he *had* been summoned here, they must have believed him to be ready! A heavy swallow and a timid bleat, and he found his voice again.

"I am Allison Shay Pipt, at your service, your High..."

Tressa threw back her head and roared with laughter. Shay froze in mid bow.

"Er... sorry? I m-mean, sorry, your..."

Tressa waved a mail-gloved hand, and recovered herself, though the soldiers still chuckled. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Mr. Pipt. May I call you Shay, then? It's just I don't really use "your highness" or "my liege" or all that bunk. Wastes time in relaying orders, for a start. Here's a deal: I call you Shay and you call me... oh, for the sake of formality, General."

Gray eyes blinked, and he managed to avoid flinching as General Tressa extended a hand. He gulped and took it, reminding himself to *not* remind himself he was shaking hands with one of the most powerful figures on the Auroupa continent.

"All right, General. Though... if I may ask such a question, was that the only reason you laughed?"

Tressa raised an eyebrow and smirked, shaking her head – a few tendrils of chestnut hair tumbled from her helmet, which she tucked back in. "Not at all, really. The thing is, I met your Dr. Pipt some time ago when I was... let's say your age. It just seems... kind of... typical, that you would be the first one he made."

"What?" Shay leaned forward quickly, then back a bit as the two men tightened their halberd grips. "I mean... General, I was the second creation... what do you mean, typical? What did he tell you?"

The grayness in his eyes lit up, and Tressa could see the blues and faint spark of burgundy flecked in the silver irises. Her mirth faded, and her smile changed from jocular to a solemn tilt at the corner of her mouth. Shay really did not know; she could see that. Tressa didn't know even half of the details herself. She couldn't risk inciting needless doubt, for the sake of their operation and the young sheep's... no, the young man's sake.

"Forgive me, it was nothing." Her gaze snapped to each of the guards with commands so quick Shay almost heard a whiplash. "Robier! Return to sentinel. Pietro! With me, start briefing." Before Shay could turn back to him Robier was hurrying to a position closer to the woods he had stepped from, and he found himself in step with Tressa, hardly able to canter to speed with the General's pace as she listened to Pietro's report. Amid clanks of armor and the clop of hooves Pietro's voice nevertheless pierced high and clear through the noise.

"Looks bad, General."

"As bad as we feared?"

"No, the wizards were surprised too. They expected tremors and terrible storms by now, you know the sort that always come packaged with ominous signs."

"Well, none of that happened, now did it?"

As they approached the seven entrance stairs and the crowd of magic-users clustered before and atop, several turned to stare. They were familiar with Tressa and her guards by now; Shay lowered his gaze and took long, careful note of the specific shade of sky-blue of the cobblestones. He gulped as a couple of the sorcerers stroked their beards – they were known to create strange, hybrid creatures of their

own and even if sheep anthros were common, his wide male hips and curves were not. Shay blushed hard as he saw one was even taking notes!

To Shay's horror, this sorcerer was the one they approached. As if to confirm the purpose of his notes, he tossed the notepad into the air and vanished it and the pen with a snap of his fingers as Tressa and Pietro halted before him.

"Alabastius, I presume?" Tressa was of impressive height, and the black-bearded sorcerer furrowed his brow. Sorcerers did not like looking up to anyone. Shay utilized the wide brim of his hat to hide his face, though his long, white-gold tresses cascaded from it and shimmered – he just bet the sorcerer was measuring it up for a spell ingredient. Then Pietro coughed and Tressa raised an eyebrow, and Alabastius harrumphed magnificently as if they had interrupted him.

"Yes, Princess–"

"General."

Alabastius glared, then withered under the blaze of Tressa's impatience. "Well... General. I'll skip to the status report then. Essentially, someone triggered something inside the Dark Cathedral, and among other things it... well..."

"You're on Riverwright payroll right now, Alabastius. Details now or cut benefits later."

"All right, all right." Alabastius held his forehead in a bony hand and sighed. Shay tilted his hat up a bit – did the sorcerer look *worried*? "We have a suspect, and – we still don't know *how* – he not only found the Cathedral, he got inside, and he managed to open... *it*."

Tressa's heavy boot tapped on the ground, and then an exasperated summoner stormed up. "Out with it, man! The Essence is back! Whoever it was not only broke all seven seals, he awakened the blasted thing! And on top of it all, he *escaped!*"

A flurry of clanks and Tressa was in the middle-aged summoner's face. "What do you mean? What on Earth is the Essence? How strong were the seals? What happened to the traps then?"

The summoner's face was grim. His dark hair was streaked with gray, and he supported his left side heavily with a thick oak staff. "The Essence... is a long story. I'll get to that starting with the rest. The seals were made millennia ago, before... well, most of everything we have records of, really. But there was civilization. And these seals were the culmination of the greatest Sworn Magic ever known then or since."

"All right... so we're dealing with a high class wizard here. Probably rogue, too."

The sorcerer had been fuming at the stolen limelight, and his voice was shrill as he intercepted. "As I was getting to, whoever we're dealing with, in more accurate terms, *unlocked* the seals set on the monolith – that's inside the Cathedral, we'll show you – and managed to awaken the Essence from its sealed state, if not completely then enough to use its power to escape the Guardians."

This time it was Pietro who piped up. "'Whoever?' You said you had a suspect."

"Er... well... we do. Or, at least, a way of finding one."

"For the love of all things holy, will SOMEONE get to the BLAST-damned *POINT?!*" Tressa roared, and the more timid wizards cringed while the rest quietly but collectively backed away. The summoner and Alabastius looked at each other, seemed to file a momentary truce, and turned to the stairs, motioning to the soldier, general and sheep.

"It'll be better if we just show you. We can get in easily now; all the dangerous parts have been set off already."

"*Finally.*" Tressa overtook the wizards and stormed up the steps and through the open one of the two high, thick, massive stone doors. Pietro quickly scurried after her, and the sorcerer and summoner shrugged and followed.

Shay blinked, then started up the stairs more timidly. Things were happening pretty quickly, and he had yet to get a word in edgewise. He brushed down his coat with his hands to try and calm his nerves, seeing the group walking back down a couple steps inside – the floor within was lowered, and the Cathedral was indeed as small inside as it looked from the outside. Shay approached the doorway, took a deep breath, and stepped through.

Black surrounded him. Empty, musty darkness surrounded everything – he couldn't see his own hands in front of his face, or even the daylight that should have been right at his back. He whirled around – or thought he did, there was no way to see if he actually turned – and bleated out in a panic.

"General! Pietro? Alabastius! Hello? *Hello?* Can't you all hear me?"

No sound, other than the bouncing echoes. That was informative, at least – he was still in a building of some sort, probably the tall Cathedral from how loud and

clear the echoes were. He couldn't see anything, though. Forcing himself to calm down with deep breaths, he sat down slowly, afraid of stumbling or falling through the darkness somehow. Crossing his legs, he rested his hands on his knees, and continued his breathing, slower, steadier, in through his nostrils, out through his mouth. When he next opened his eyes, the room was no longer dark.

He was indeed in the Dark Cathedral, and it looked exactly as old with the same shattered windows as when he had seen it from just outside the doorway. He wasn't looking at it through his physical eyes, though. The room was technically just as dark as moments before, only now he could see it as if the walls and floor themselves were glowing with a soft blue light – as if all of the light reflecting off the room were from a blue sun, with flecks of dark red sparking here and there like glints from a garnet.

Shay had managed to project his astral form, rather easily, as if the pitch-black room were closer to the Dream plane somehow. He was just as confused now as before, though. He walked silently forward, but there was still no sight of anyone, nor any sounds to be heard from them. Right then he should have been standing where they had just been! On top of it all, when he looked back at the entrance the doorway, though still open, opened to pitch black as well even on this plane. It was as if, currently, only the inside of the Cathedral existed.

At least he was able to see what the monolith was. Right at the back of the Cathedral was a hexagonal prism the size of a large closet, seemingly made out of a single massive stone with doors that looked cut into the rock itself. They were open, and inside all Shay could see was a small pillar reaching about as high as his neck,

with a plain bust atop it that looked more like the upper torso of a dressmaker's dummy than anything else – faceless and featureless, the mere suggestion of a form. The more Shay looked at it from outside the monolith, the more it seemed like the most logical structure to hang his coat on, if he wanted to display it –

“Well, you caught on quicker than the first bumbling group that poked at it. Just what I'd expect really; you always were such a *bright* little lamb, Shay dear.”

Ice ran through Shay's astral form, a state in which he technically shouldn't “feel” anything. The chill was present despite the paradoxical warmth radiating from behind him, and he drifted in a slow turn, arms at his sides with hands ready to begin spellcasting.

“J'ody. What... what are *you* doing *here*?!”

The coyote before him shifted his constant smirk to a wider one, and flipped out a long-stemmed cigarette from nowhere. Shay was further shaken – no one should be able to blend with the corporeal and astral planes like J'ody could. The coyote's clothes, as usual, were impeccable, fitted slacks and a button up long sleeve shirt starched and spotless. His hair curled and coiled around him, bangs covering half his face much like Shay's, though his long hair sparked and flickered lazily like a slow fire. He took a few, long puffs on the cigarette and his exhailes twined and billowed beneath him to form a thick gray cloud, which he sat and lounged on, crossing one leg luxuriantly.

“I had to see what all the commotion was about – especially since I heard they enlisted you, little Allison, to help. I don't know if you noticed, but even Larulan enforcers were outside, as well as more than a couple Copernican mage-smiths.

What went down here was a pretty big deal for everyone in the wide, wild world, and all the pretty nations are anxious to figure out what happens next.”

Shay waved both hands while twitching certain fingers, and his Allison’s Crook appeared in his hands, the shepherd’s staff comforting in his grip – summonable from the astral plane but useable here and in corporeality, it was a tool he trusted. J’ody raised an eyebrow, and his canine tail twitched, showed the limp, bent end Shay had left him in a previous encounter.

Shay’s eyes gleamed like molten silver as his determination found him. “What *did* happen here, J’ody? And what is happening next?”

The coyote sniffed, and took another drag. “I’m only gonna tell you because I really can’t stand the incompetence of the Idiot Gallery here. Nutshell: a promising little wizard stumbled on the Dark Cathedral completely on accident, that door practically opened for him, and he managed to figure out how to unlock the monolith. Once in, the poor sap felt so bad for Daroque, he grabbed him up and then...”

“Daroque? Who is Daroque?”

J’ody looked down his long, slim muzzle, and Shay’s astral cheeks went pink. “Let me finish, you little upstart, you. Daroque is the Essence they keep talking about, and another nutshell there is that he’s the one they built all this for to seal him in. Or rather, they sealed him, stuck him in the monolith, then someone decided to make extra sure, built the Dark Cathedral around *that*, and for good measure shoved it between dimensions so no one could ever actually *get* to it. But this little wizard did. *Anyway*, Daroque was sealed up in that monolith, and soon as our little

wizard went in and had what I can only assume was a heart-wrenching little chit-chat he did *something* by accident, gathered the Essence up into some handier form, and bolted out faster than a chipmunk on *xocolātl*. How he got past the traps set off by breaking the seals even I can't quite figure out."

Shay was stunned, and looked back at the monolith, then faced J'ody again. "That's... a lot to process. But more to the point," He pointed his Crook at J'ody, who frowned. "How come when I came in the whole place blackened out? And why bother showing yourself?"

A small chuckle escaped him, and by the time Shay gasped in realization that the sound came from behind him, J'ody's double had wrapped his arms around his waist and his arms, and was whispering huskily in his ear.

"Apparently this Cathedral has effects on certain individuals... and the fact that you are one such singular person, *dear* Shay, enlightens me to just how... useful you can be to me."

Shay opened his mouth, but his voice had been stolen; he still gripped his Crook, but his arms had no power, and his fingers were losing strength as J'ody traced his spells with fingers that slid along Shay's fur. They were both on the astral plane, but Shay still shouldn't have shivered and silently groaned at the lewd touches – but he did, and J'ody tightened his grip, speaking further even as flames flickered from his lips in further spells of binding.

"That damn Cheshire has been tracking me, just like I've been tracking you, *darling*, only I have no intention of being one of his pleasure-puppets. So I'll just do

that to you. I have an inkling you can influence the near future just as much as that little wizard who caused such a ruckus... and I want your powers on *my* leash."

Shay could feel the words of binding, even hear how they were laced with mental suppression and new commands to move him. He was fixed fast, even his involuntary tremors had ceased, and his Crook started to slip between his fingers. This was it, the coyote had finally trapped him, here so far from home where no one knew him, no one could save him...

ERROR. NEW INPUT DOES NOT MATCH DIRECTIVES. CANCEL INPUT?

Oh. Right. There was that. With all the perception he could muster Shay gave affirmation.

J'ody's hands twitched. "...Now what?"

INPUT CANCELLED. FOREIGN ENCRYPTION DETECTED. OVERRIDE?

"NO!" J'ody bit his fangs into Shay's neck, losing just enough focus for Shay to cry out – blood trickled from the neck of his physical body, and burgundy trails glinted from his astral form. "I am NOT losing this! You are MINE, little sheep-bitch!"

ERROR. OVERRIDE CANNOT EXECUTE. LUST LEVELS PREVENTING EXECUTION OF WILL. TO CONTINUE, PLEASE OVERRIDE LUST. A pause. APPROXIMATE SENSUAL TRANSLATION: DISPLAY CONFIDENCE.

"Nnnngh... nnnn... no."

J'ody bit down harder, and Shay grit his teeth. "I *said* that you're..."

The Crook swung between their legs, and collided with J'ody's crotch first. His howl was amplified once Shay channeled an electrical shock through it, his form soon hurled from the coyote's proximity. Both his astral form and his vision whirled,

and he shakily clutched a hand to his neck. As his vision cleared, he saw J'ody snarl at him.

This time Shay was ready. He twirled in midair and clocked the coyote on the side of the head with the Crook, a sharp yelp sounding out as the coyote's form flew through and dissipated the cloud, colliding with the hard, stone floor.

Shay breathed heavily, catching his breath and feeling the last of the binding spells evaporate. As J'ody struggled to get up, he spat out blood and a tooth.

"You... fluffy, wooly little *bitch*... why can't you be a good little lamb and just let me OWN you?"

Shay narrowed his silver eyes towards him, then bleated in surprise as J'ody rolled to his knees and spewed forth twenty feet of searing flame. He tumbled out of the way in time, though his legs glowed burgundy on his shimmering white-gold form, burn scars trailing up his physical form's legs. Shay hissed in pain, and paid attention to the synthesized voice ringing out in his mind.

DANGER! SITUATION DIRE: OPPONENT'S SKILL LEVEL SIGNIFICANTLY GREATER THAN –

I REALIZE THAT, Shay thought to himself. *WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST?*

EVASIVE MANEUVERS!

EASIER SAID THAN DONE, I DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW I ENDED UP HERE...

"You little fucker, give me ten more seconds and I'll have you on your knees! I'll show you what..."

Ghlk. J'ody choked on his words. A black blade extended from his ribs, and he stared down at it, jaw agape in shock. The sword was held by... nothing, which meant the wielder was in the corporeal plane. Then how...?

Shay's eyes widened and J'ody groaned, in pain and anticipation, as words of power rang out like gongs, filling the astral room with so much sound the blue-tinted walls shuddered and vibrated faster, faster, harder, louder, and seemed to shatter all at once, throwing Shay back into his body with a loud intake of breath followed by a coughing fit.

As Shay gasped and choked, trying to handle a return to physical breathing, a wound on his neck, and stinging burns all at once. He shuddered and bleated weakly, regaining his sense, and he wiped eyes that had teared up from his coughing. After what he had been through, he raised tired eyebrows with a mumbled "huh" at the sight.

A tall, thin, pale and very blonde man had an arm around J'ody's neck, the iron sword still thrust through him but the bloodflow magically congealed and halted. The coyote anthro was still, not daring to struggle with a sword piercing him, and Tressa, Pietro, Alabastius, the summoner and a wide circle of crowded magic users all stared at the tall man, J'ody, and Shay in shock.

True to form, Tressa spoke first. "What in hell just happened? Shay, you vanished, and barely five minutes later... who is this dog?!"

J'ody opened his mouth to speak, but was slapped across the muzzle by the blonde man. The blow apparently included a jaw-lock spell, as the coyote's muzzle snapped shut and he blazed a simmering gaze at the man, who smiled grimly.

He spoke. "This, Tress, is J'ody. Say 'hi' to the greatest scoundrel many wizards have had the displeasure of meeting for the past few years."

Tressa noticed Shay stumbling to stand on his hooves, and nodded to Pietro. The soldier marched up and helped support the sheep, who gave him a grateful smile from behind his bangs. "All right, since you shut the dog up, would you mind telling me what this is about, Jasper?"

Jasper nodded, with a wink to Shay, who gave a puzzled ba-aa. "Gladly. Your Allison here seemed to trigger some aspect of the Cathedral – why or how it's too soon to guess – and cleverly enough projected himself to the astral plane. Just as mysterious is how our canine chap here knew to set a trap, and the two got into an impromptu duel. That's why the scorch marks showed up, which I have to admit was my biggest clue as to what was going on. Luckily iron works pretty well on our flaming fellow here, and doubly fortunate was the fact that he messed about with the corporeal and astral planes enough to stick out like a sore thumb on the right wavelength."

Shay's brow furrowed, and he clopped forward. J'ody stared at him as the sheep turned to Jasper. One look at the badge on his chest pocket told him this was the Riverwright Royal Wizard he had missed before. He looked at the black sword still jarring out from J'ody's ribs and a hole in his shirt. "Er... if I may ask... this is odd I know with all things considered but... is he okay? I mean... you kind of... speared him through..."

Still silent, J'ody rolled his eyes and shifted his gaze to look at the ground. Jasper chuckled and nodded. "He's fine as he can be. He'll have trouble prancing

about for a while," J'ody's tail jerked angrily, "mostly because of the fact he's not quite mortal. And that I make a rule of detaining, not killing – his major organs will be fine. The iron and my spells more are what're holding him back right now."

Shay nodded, and tried to meet J'ody's eye; the coyote stubbornly stared at the floor, lips pouting as he tried to hide behind his hair. Pietro moved quickly as Shay drowsily started to fall over, the Crook still held in one hand falling from it and vanishing before it hit the ground. Tressa sighed, and looked around at everyone, somehow catching the attention of all despite the mumbles and confusion.

"All right, everyone, let's clear out. I'm sure you've all scanned the area thoroughly. I *strongly* encourage that *all* of you show up at Verdantside Palace tonight. Especially our... esteemed guests from, oh let's see, Larulan, Coperne, and yes, the emissaries from Western Gyrmain, I see you there. I think we could all share in what each of us has discovered here today, starting *first* with the Riverwright council. No need for argument, right?"

Several of the magic users in the room grumbled in protest with rising volume, but Jasper just grinned. A symphony of "harrumphs," timed beautifully for effect, sounded from outside the doors and in the clearing beyond that. Several squads of Tressa's troops idled in plain view, and despite their expressed nonchalance all of them made sure to let their weapons, including magic-resistant iron and silver among the steel, glisten in the sunlight. The murmurs gave way to resigned shuffling as the Cathedral was cleared out.

Shay waited as everyone left, turning around to look at the monolith again. It was identical to how it had looked on the astral plane, except it was a dull reddish

color now, with shadows within due to the structure having no windows. He could still barely make out the pedestal and bust, and found himself wondering again how well a coat would fit on the bust's shoulders. A coat, a robe, a cloak... he felt the computer-like portions of his mind file it away, and shrugged off his nagging concerns. Jasper smiled and motioned for Shay to go ahead of him, and Shay's hooves rang out clear on the polished dark-grey floor, echoing even after Jasper led J'ody out the door and made sure no one had straggled behind.

Notes: This chapter takes place a little over a week after Lumiere first entered and then escaped the Dark Cathedral. A large, legendary building suddenly appearing, complete with a couple acres of land, in the middle of Riverwright was cause for concern and investigation. Shay has been summoned to the scene, as Princess Tressa and Parliament (for once) agreed to cover all areas of magical expertise in exploring the Cathedral. Since Shay is one of the most promising Allison's on the continent that pioneered the field, he ended up being the representative of them. His relation to Dr. Marvis Pipt may also have contributed to the call for his presence.

It should be mentioned that Riverwright is in the Auropa (akin to our world's Europe) continent, and Shay is from the southwestern area of Melbourne (pretty much like Australia). "A little over a week" is a short time to travel the approximate distance from Australia to Europe; Shay spent about half the travel time getting to York (the capital city of Melbourne), being teleported with the assistance of York University wizards from Melbourne to a city in Auropa, and the rest of the trip on trains headed to Riverwright.

The Tree in the Church-Pot

Perched on a lone tree growing out of a church's skeleton, Licori looked out at the city. One leg dangled in the air, and he was quite relieved that the base of this branch was so stout and strong – his full, round, thick form could sit quite at ease here. His umbrella lay on his lap, and his fingers gently traced through the folds of the Kelly and cardinal-patterned fabric.

The church had been magnificent in its time, but a new building of worship had been constructed nearer the heart of the city. This one lay as a testament to the fate of old craftsmanship, carefully hewn and fitted stones falling out of the mortar, stained glass windows victim to the elements or stones flung from youths' hands. Somewhere in that time one of many seeds in the cracks of the tiled floor had sprouted, and kept growing until it had consumed most of the church's remains, branches entangling through the walls and the trunk curving this way and that over time to catch the sunlight. Now the building looked more like an elaborate pot for the mighty, uniquely shaped tree.

The mutt's wide, bare back rested against part of this trunk. Though the knots and twists in the tree made it look coarse from a distance, most of the bark was weathered to a soft, smooth texture, making for a comfortable lounging spot. His eyes lazily scanned the city ahead and below, the old church perched on a steep hill at the outskirts of the hopeful metropolis. Soon, however, his eyes became alert as they spotted a certain figure. Stretching slowly with a luxuriant groan, Licori stood up on the branch.

Gunshot was heard, and he stumbled, quickly jumping down from branch to branch with an agility belied by bouncing belly fat. As he neared the ground, he chuckled and shook his head. It seemed that his expected rendezvous was embroiled in the situation deeper than he had predicted.

The clapping of leather riding sandals on blue cobblestones rang out to puzzled pedestrians; as soon as they realized that the sound was only a prelude to the pursuing rifle blasts they screamed and ducked behind quickly locked doors.

Lumiere panted as he lost count of his steady breathing, and the panic finally set in. "Oh gods gods gods GAH! What is this?"

A short shawl-cloak lay draped over his shoulders, and the elaborately embroidered eyes upon it glanced up. A steady voice sounded in the fleeing border collie's mind.

"Well, trotting up to them with nary a glamour or illusion or even, Gaea forbid, a pseudonym certainly gave them a hint as to your identity."

"But... but! How was I to know they'd know who I was out *here*? We're at least two hundred miles from Feldsparse!" Lumiere yelped as, momentarily distracted, he nearly missed casting a misdirection spell for the next volley of bullets. The round miniature missiles scattered around him, and he winced as they grazed and slashed his fur. Shallow, but much too close.

"True, but we're twenty miles from River Crossing, which apparently stations a few Deputy Wizards. Now focus!" The eyes darted back and forth, and the voice

hurriedly continued, "There! That alley on the next block! But wait, cast a double to keep running at least, for Gaea's sake!"

Dashing for the escape route, Lumiere would have forgotten the decoy had the cloak not reminded him. As he neared the alleyway, his fingers fluttered and danced before him in a movement blurred by adrenaline. As he leaped off the ground into the narrow alley, he flung his handpaw out.

He huddled around the corner, struggling to quiet his gasping breaths, and watched an image of himself continue running. It was a basic recording of the last few minutes of his escape, set to repeat and stick to the middle of any streets it encountered.

Clanking footsteps neared, and with no prompting from Lumiere the cloak extended and covered him head to footpaw, a hood covering his face. The border collie nodded silently, and pressed himself closer to the shade of the wall. The two were invisible in the shadows, not seen by the lightly armored guardsmen trooping past, reloading their rifles for another shot.

A sorcerer passed by, slowing down with a suspicious look at the fleeing double. He stroked his black beard, and with a snap of his fingers and a wave he broke off a chunk of roof tile and made it dart towards the image of the fleeing dog. The soldiers didn't see it, but his eyes widened as it passed through the border collie's illusion. After muttering to himself, he grinned.

"Looks like Alabastius will claim the prize after all. Come out, come out little puppy!" With a cackle his hand whirled and ignited a green blaze of wispy fire down

the alleyway. A loud *yelp* was heard, as a dark-cloaked figure was blown out of the shadows and landed heavily on the ground, groaning.

“Well, well, well. It would seem Riverwright’s unknown troublemaker is still at an apprentice’s level!” Alabastius’s eyes began to simmer like coals, and smoke even steamed from his tear ducts, “Surrender now, and I’ll make sure you reach the Princess *mostly* intact.”

Lumiere backed up against the wall, the hood luckily still concealing his face aside from his protruding muzzle. Alabastius began a rapid chant, and the pup froze in fear even with the cloak’s desperate pleas to *move* ringing in his head. All his vision would allow was sight of the magical wavelength bending and warping around the sorcerer as he gathered what would be a vile and painful curse.

A few of Alabastius’s teeth bounced on the ground as his robed form spun in the air, then followed his molars with a more gravid *whumf*. Licori grinned and held his heavy umbrella over one shoulder, nodding to Lumiere.

“Sorcerors are really one-track, aren’t they? Get to an encore of running, pup, that regiment just saw your double run through a wall; they’re quick on the uptake for hired muscle.” The overweight mutt winked, and Lumiere blushed heavily before, after Licori added a playful wave, he bolted down the alley.

“About *godsmacking* TIME! Were you waiting to see his incendiary technique on cuisine or did you actually want to feel what a thousand needles all at once felt like? Because that was the *first* layer of his spell.”

Lumiere huffed and panted, but a lolling grin was plastered on his face as his white-furred cheeks still glowed pink. "Who was that? Why did he help us? And did you see him wink?" A giddy giggle escaped the border collie, and the cloak groaned.

"You really are a regular budding horndog, aren't you?"

The pup only grinned wider, the cloak settling to a mental grumble as it flapped behind the pup as he slowed to a jog, approaching the edge of town where rolling fields were visible ahead.

Notes: Licori has been watching several events of the story unfold, and what he hasn't seen he has learned by asking passersby and various informants. He made note of Lumiere's continued trek from the border collie's home town of Feldsparse, and has anticipated the pup would need assistance. Seeing such was the case, he stepped in. Licori apparently is also aware of some of Lumiere's inclinations (i.e. lust) towards larger males, so we'll probably see him again sooner rather than later as Lumiere both tries to escape those who seek him and attempts to find time to figure out what to do next.

This chapter takes place after Lumiere enters the Cathedral; he is wearing the cloak that contains the spirit he awakened, the Essence known as Daroque. The cloak and he have developed a familiarity, and so talk much more frankly than they did initially. The events here are also after Shay, Tressa, her soldiers and the assorted wizards explored the Dark Cathedral, and different people are executing varying means of finding, then capturing, the one who entered the Cathedral and escaped with the Essence that had been sealed within.

An Excess of Knowledge

Lumiere ran down the steps of Copernican University, lifting up the hood of his cloak and trying to keep himself from snarling with rage. His bare footpaws padded down the marble, already halfway down the sweeping, wide staircase before Christopher burst past the open entrance doors.

“Lumiere! Lu! Hold on!”

Lumiere ran down faster, and Daroque’s eyes peeked up from the front of his capelet.

“Shouldn’t we at least listen to what he has to say, Lumiere?” asked the cloak.

The border collie gripped the fabric and pulled it forward so he could glare directly at the concerned expression of the woven cloth-eyes. His steps slowed, but still he descended until he was walking briskly along the pavement of the university plaza.

“Are you serious?! After what he told us? How can I trust someone who...who... cavorts and does... *that* with summoned spirits! It’s disgus... its disrespectful!” Lumiere started with a shout, but reduced it down to an angry, hissing whisper as he realized the plaza was, if scarcely, occupied even during morning prayer services.

Daroque’s purple eyebrows furrowed, and his eyes lit up in cold, quiet discontent. “You talk about the summoned spirits as if they are no more than four-legs.”

Lumiere paused, impatient confusion etched on his face and muzzle. "But... they're not sentient, they can't... consent or make decisions like... like us, like *people*, can they?"

The spirit-cloak's voice was icy but steady. "I am a summoned spirit, Lumiere."

"...Oh. Oh dear." Lumiere blinked, and he felt a red blush show obviously through white cheek-fur. Still, he was indignant. "But that doesn't excuse what he does!"

An eyebrow was raised on the capelet, which the border collie loosened his grip on sheepishly.

"You speak as if to think of summoned beings as having physical needs is a sin. As if considering 'sentient' beings that are given an earthly shape harboring earthly desires is absurd."

Lumiere's ears drooped, and he looked genuinely perplexed. "Er..."

A mental sigh was heard in Lumiere's mind, and Daroque continued.

"Little Lantern-Dog, let me put it like this: my sexual urges have never been quelled from being in this sealed shape. If I were myself again, I would be quite happy to indulge in... actively pursuing 'reproduction,' to put it un-coarsely."

The border collie knew that he felt himself twitch, he just hoped it wasn't too obvious.

"Um... so." He tried to get his mental and vocal gears back to functioning, but his brain only squeaked. Lumiere had never even considered Daroque as he must once have been, a fully physical, autonomous, quite likely sexual being. The spirit

had always been a guide, a guardian, a mentor and teacher. To think of Daroque as having the same urges as anyone, like Lumiere for instance – wait.

“Er, Daroque...”

“Yes, Lumiere?”

“Did you have urges... like mine? You know, in regards to, er, being bimasculine?” Lumiere felt himself cringe in anticipation.

“Why yes, Lumiere, yes I did. In fact, one particular handsome, young...”

“Ah-dah-buh-NO!” Lumiere stammered nonsense in a panic to avoid knowing far too much about the spirit. He wanted to keep his mental image of mentor, teacher, etc. intact. The chuckling he heard in his mind didn’t help much in that regard, either.

Lumiere realized that he had walked to the next block, and was standing on the street corner. He turned, and his tail fell in a guilty droop as Christopher had almost caught up with them. After what he’d said, Lumiere had just run out, and the border collie tried to come up with some explanation or apology to the Labrador.

“Christopher, I... look, I’m sorry, it was a lot to take in at once.”

The blond-furred Lab studied him carefully, and took a peek at the cloth eyes that looked blankly from the front of Lumiere’s capelet. Unseen by Lumiere, an eye winked before returning to a blank stare, and Christopher grinned and shook his head.

“Hey, no worries there, pup. I shoulda ‘spected it, I mean, you being so upright n’ proper n’ all. One’d think ya had a stick up yer arse!”

Lumiere growled and curled a paw into a fist, hackles rising past his shirt-collar. "Now, hang on half a second!"

Christopher held up both paws with a chuckle. "Just messin' with you, pup." One of the paws lowered and extended out amicably to Lumiere.

"Look, let's start over, shall we? Ah'm Christopher Corby, expert in summoning n' knavery of such." He stuck out his tongue and winked with a wicked smile.

The border collie sighed and couldn't help but smile back, ears pricking up as he accepted and shook the Labrador's paw.

"I'm Lumiere d'Canari, and I think I can live with that."

"Excellent! Shall I show you the bull-dragon next? He's a big'un!"

Lumiere knew his tail twitched and jerked obviously just then. "Um... actually, you said you had something important for us to know?"

Christopher threw back his head and laughed with a mirthsome bark, then nodded, leading the somewhat awkward-feeling Lumiere with an arm over his shoulder as he whispered, "Yeah, yeah, there's some info ya should know. Best fer all our interests to head back to Copernican U, though, away from pryin' eyes n' ears. Though... I wasn't kidding about that bull-dragon. Hung like a..."

Lumiere and Daroque both coughed and glared at the Labrador. "*Thank* you very much, but I have a magic textbook if I... really want to know."

"Suit yerself." Chris shrugged, and Lumiere met Daroque's eyes again. They agreed on one thing: if anyone were looking for suspicious magical activity here, they would have found Chris first by now.

Notes: This chapter is after Lumiere and Daroque make their escape from the sorcerer Alabastius with Licori's help. In the previous chapter Lumiere, upon arriving in the capital city of Coperne, ran into Christopher Corby, a student at the prestigious Copernican University. Upon inviting them inside to help hide them, Christopher revealed some details about his more private magical practices. Here, Lumiere has left Chris's company in a hurry and is persuaded back. Upon giving Chris the benefit of the doubt and returning with him to the University, Lumiere will learn more about the present situation across the continent, and be able to get help in figuring out exactly who he is and how some of his magic works.